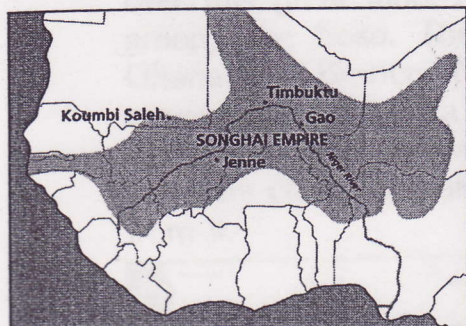


# Voices from the Past: Askia Muhammad

I, Askia Muhammad, have fallen far in my lifetime. Once king of Songhai, the largest empire in our continent's history, today I am a broken man banished to an island in the Niger River. I wish to tell my story, that all may know of our empire and my work to make it great.



Though my people have been in this world for hundreds of years, our lands were small until the rule of our warrior king, Sonni Ali. After the death of Mali's Mansa Musa in 1337, weaker leaders followed and Sonni Ali was able to conquer most of Mali's land in the late 1400's.

I served as a governor and general for Sonni Ali and greatly respected him. His use of horses and ships in warfare was brilliant! He could also be cruel though. He would torture his captives and use poison on arrow tips to make death more painful for his enemies. However, under his leadership Timbuktu and Jenne became our most important trading cities. People would come from near and far to buy our slaves and other goods. He also created a strong system of government and law.

When Sonni Ali died in 1492, his son became the new ruler. I could see that the young man was a poor ruler and would harm our people so I seized control from him. I am, as are many in our land, a Muslim and worked to bring Islam to my people. Our system of law was run according to Muslim principles. I appointed Muslims to government positions and I led a tremendous Hajj to Makkah.

Despite my efforts, I must admit that I failed to make Songhai an Islamic kingdom. Though the religion has grown in importance in cities, most people in our Songhai Empire continue to follow their tribal religions. However I did have other successes for which I am proud.

First I was able to organize and strengthen the government so that we could control our large empire. I established a system of weights and measures for use by all people in our lands. The system of law that I put into place has brought order and peace to our people. Our cities have become great centers of culture and learning, attracting Muslim scholars from faraway lands. I have heard from visitors that Songhai is spoken of as the greatest empire in all of Africa and that I was known in foreign lands as a great statesman.

Unfortunately, though, I did not succeed in raising caring and respectful children. In 1528 my three sons overthrew me and took control of the government. I was banished from the land and taken to live on this island with only my guards for company.